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Violence and morality in Mongolia: the limited good revisited

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For the past several years, one of the topics I have been researching and seeking to understand is the legacy of political violence in Mongolia. I have been looking at the ways in which the issue has been used as a political tool. In my work, I have recently been led to return to an old, but still useful, anthropological concept: George Foster's idea of the "limited good." I think the idea has interesting several applications in Mongolian political culture. Some I am quite sure of, others are more tentative. All offer, however, some fruitful ideas and paths for future research. For example, I am think it may help explain why Mongolia's 'coming to terms with the past' (or its relative lack thereof) has taken the shape that it has. For the present, however, I will content myself with exploring the concept's power in understanding the concept of being a victim of political repression and how the label is used in Mongolia.

I start by offering some historical background on Mongolia and the repressions.

Throughout the twentieth century, the fate of Mongolia was intertwined with that of the Soviet Union. In 1921, Mongolia became the first country to follow the Bolsheviks into socialism. Soon after, it followed the Soviet Union into its own version of Stalin's Great Terror. The greatest period of repression was between Fall 1937 and Spring 1939. Almost 26,000 people were prosecuted during this period. Over 20,000 were executed, with another

5300 or so receiving prison sentences. Only seven were found innocent.[1] The total number of people killed may never be known, but most estimates range between 25,000 and 35,000,[2] at least 4 percent of the population of the time.

After 1939, there were few executions, but arrests, exile, prison sentences and harassment continued, reaching a peak in the 1960s. Families of those arrested or killed were harassed in a multitude of ways, and in the earlier periods their property was confiscated. This practice later fell from common usage, although it remained part of the criminal code until at least the 1980s.[3] The threat of repression and violence was ever present in the socialist period. This would seem to argue that all were victims of the regime to a degree, much as Havel has argued.[4] I have, however, met few Mongols who share this view. And this is where things start to get interesting. I will come back to this in a moment.

The true extent of the repressions only became public with the openness brought about by the Mongolian equivalents of *glasnost'* and *perestroika* in the late 1980s, and in particular, the democratic revolution of 1990. Many of the details are still being uncovered.[5] Issues such as the legacy of and responsibility for the repressions emerged as a contested site in political and moral discourse.[6] Rehabilitation of repressed figures was one of the first actions taken as socialism came to an end. By the mid-1990s a museum commemorating the repressed was

[1] Ölziibaatar 1999: 24.
[2] This number is higher than those known to be killed by the tribunal because it includes those who fell outside the time period the tribunal was in operation. It also seems clear that not everyone killed in the year and a half were sentenced by the tribunal.
[3] See the sections in BNMAU-yn Shüüh Yam (1980) dealing with the criminal code, and in particular, crimes against the state, pp. 82ff.
[4] See Havel 1991. Havel, the Czech dissident (and president) argued that under socialism all were to some degree complicit in the propagation of the regime, merely by seeking to get by.
[5] Apparently a new mass grave near Ulaanbaatar was found just this past summer. I still haven't been able to get more details.
[6] See Kaplonski 1999 and 2002 for some of these issues.

founded, a law for compensation of victims was passed in 1998, and apologies were demanded.

During the post-socialist period, the label of being a victim of political violence has become particularly important. It can provide some modest material benefits, but more importantly than that, it can provide a certain degree of moral authority. An official mark of shame during the socialist period, it would undergo a transformation, becoming for some a label loaded with symbolic significance and capital. As a result of this transformation, it also became a contested term. Exactly who could lay claim to the term was (and is) open to debate. The use of this label can perhaps best be illustrated through the case of two people, both political repression activists, whom I will call "Dorj" and "Dulmaa."

Dulmaa was the daughter of a prominent politician who had been killed in 1937. Her family did not learn until about 1990 that he had been secretly rehabilitated in 1962. Dulmaa saw herself, through her father, as a victim of repression. And indeed, like family members of other repressed people, she suffered. She was denied educational opportunities and was treated as an outcast, to cite just two examples. Her experiences understandably colored her view of the issue. For Dulmaa, the status of "repressed" could only be claimed for those who had been executed and their families; in other words, the victims of the 1930s.

In contrast to Dulmaa, Dorj himself had been repressed. Dorj had been arrested in the mid-1960s in connection with one of the more famous cases of the period. He was charged with anti-party agitation, and spent five years in jail and several more in exile in the west of the country.

Dorj's definition of the repressed was relatively broad. For him, anyone who had been falsely arrested and/or exiled, in any period, counted as a victim of repression. So did their families. This again is understandable, given his experience.

But Dulmaa saw things differently. Dorj did not count as a "real" victim despite his arrest, imprisonment and exile. His case was "completely different" (*shal öör*) as Dulmaa told me on more than one occasion. Dulmaa, through her father, saw herself as a "true" victim of repression. It followed, then, that she had a greater right to speak for the victims of repression than did Dorj. The conflicting views of who was a victim lead to competing goals, and Dulmaa's dislike, and even, it seemed, distrust of Dorj.

Dulmaa seemed mainly interested in seeing that victims were remembered and commemorated. Dorj had a more overtly political agenda. Not only would he have liked to see the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party – the ruling party during the socialist period – dragged before a human rights court for the repressions, but in particular he wanted the compensation offered to victims and their relatives to be paid from Party funds, not from the state budget as is currently done.

The differences between Dorj and Dulmaa and their agendas speak to larger issues than simple personal rivalry or dislike. They implicate overlapping but competing conceptions of "victim." The category of victim as most often used in Mongolia ultimately relies on a notion of limited good – we can not, *contra* Havel, all be victims. The label of victim is invested with considerable symbolic capital, and for some to benefit from it, others must be excluded.

There are, in effect, two competing definitions of "victim" at work in Mongolia – a legal one, and a social one. The legal one is relatively straightforward, being defined as

people who had been repressed according to certain laws, Party resolutions and so similar means. By this definition, Dorj is a victim of political repression. Dulmaa is not. Yet in conventional, social usage, both are considered (and consider themselves) victims. This more inclusive social identity is facilitated by the way language is wielded. In every day speech the term "repressed" (*helmegdegch*) is used for both those who fit the legal definition and their relatives who consider themselves effected by what happened. The term thus renders all those who consider themselves victimized by the repressions linguistically equal.

This is where the concept of limited good comes in. The basic idea of the "limited good," in Foster's phrasing is that "the desired things in life … exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply" (Foster 1965: 296). The use of identity as symbolic capital, at least with regards to victimhood, in other words, is a zero-sum game. One can only be more of a victim at the expense of someone else being less of a victim. This in turn makes the identity a resource, one to be contested by people and groups.

The benefit one person or group receives from the use of a particular label must be balanced by a similar loss by another person or group. This is clear in Dulmaa's use of the concept of victim. Underlying her distinction between the "real" repressions of the 1930s and the later ones is the belief that if all were recognized as equally deserving of the label, her own position would somehow be diluted. There is only a certain amount of "morality" to go around and the more people share it, the less each person gets.[7] Dorj and Dulmaa have both heavily invested in the identity of "victim" as part of their post-socialist life. For them, the ability to translate this into political or symbolic advantage is important.

The concept of identity as a limited good is also recognized by the MPRP itself. From the early 1990s until 2000, various groups had called for the MPRP to apologize for the

[7] There are, of course, other issues at play here, but I do not have time to go into them here.

repressions. In 1996, the then-in-power Democratic Coalition offered an apology on behalf of the government. The MPRP did not. A political force that had grown out of the democratic revolution, the Coalition had come to power only a few months previously. Not having a direct stake in the issue, such as the MPRP, Dorj or Dulmaa, they nonetheless were able to use it in an attempt to increase their own political standing. They were particularly interested in using the issue against the MPRP who remained a potent enough political force to be able to derail the Coalition's agenda.[8]

Throughout the 1990s however, the MPRP refused to apologize, arguing that they were in fact the most repressed of all groups, since the bulk of those repressed had been MPRP members. It would be absurd to think that the MPRP would repress itself, the logic went. That is, the MPRP also tried to lay claim to the weight that the label of victim carried. Most people I talked to, however, did not buy into this logic, although it should be noted that a few did.

In September 2000, following the MPRP's sweeping victory in the parliamentary elections, the Prime Minister, N. Enhbayar, finally offered an apology for the repressions. Yet how he did so is most instructive. In the context of the repressions of the 1930s, when Stalinist pressure was paramount, Enhbayar apologized because "the MPRP lacked the force to stop or actively limit the repressions."[9] He did however explicitly apologize for the repressions of the 1950s and 1960s. Like Dulmaa he made a distinction between the two periods of repression.[10] The apology was designed to associate the MPRP with the victims, as evident

[8] I am sure that many of the people involved also felt it was the "right" thing to do. Nonetheless, the debates over the law on compensating the victims make it quite clear that all recognized the political implications (Kaplonski 1999).
[9] Enhbayar 2000.
[10] The reasons he felt it 'safe' to apologize for the later repressions are complicated, but seem to re-affirm Dulmaa's distinctions. It is important to note that even here, he is very careful to blame the Party leadership, not the Party as a whole. He still seeks to avoid collective blame.

in the headline given in the party newspaper, *Ünen*, which quoted Enhbayar: "the MPRP itself was the most repressed political force."[11]

Enhbayar clearly felt that to apologize and hence accept responsibility for the killings would place the MPRP in a subordinate position to those claiming the status of victim.[12] They would lose out in the struggle for their portion of the limited good accorded to the victims of repression. Indeed, to apologize would be to admit guilt, and this would not only lower their status, but also expose them to claims of compensation directed at the party, instead of the state. There are other issues involved. These include Mongolia's larger geo-political context and the historically fragile nature of its independence. But these move us beyond the scope of the present talk.

The label of "repressed" was a life-changing one for people. In the post-socialist period they have come to have some control over how the label is applied and used as an identity. Indeed, there are those who refuse to adopt the identity. The freedom to consider oneself as a victim or not does not mean, however, that there are no constraints or influences on how the concept is used. People do not adopt or discard identities in a vacuum. Cultural constraints, pragmatic issues and other considerations come into play. What I have tried to do here is explore one particular influence – the notion of the limited good. In doing so, I have sketched out how and why the notion of limited good makes the issue of who can lay claim to being a victim of repression such a compelling and important one. It is important to the Mongols for obvious reasons. It is also important to us as anthropologists because it forces us to critically examine one aspect of the legacy of violence – the identity of the victim – with

[11] Enhbayar 2000

[12] Despite the pressure from the Soviet Union, the special commission that sentenced most of the people was composed only of Mongols. It seems to me one must acknowledge at least the active complicity of the MPRP leadership of the time, even if one chooses to ultimately place the blame on the Soviets. The issue of who was to blame for the 1930s repressions is debated, but most people I talked to seemed dissatisfied with Enhbayar's apology. Others accepted it mainly because they felt a more explicitly one would not be forthcoming.

more care than has usually been done before. The nature of events behind the discussion – the knock at the door in the middle of the night, the bullet in the back of the head – does not mean we can shy away from taking a critical look at the issues involved. Indeed, it is precisely because of what happened that we need to look at the current uses of such identities more closely.

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